Conclusion

That the popes exercised supervision over Spanish ecclesiastical affairs is but one of the indications that Leonese churchmen were subject to the same constraints as their contemporaries in other kingdoms. Other similarities abound, as will by now be evident. To claim that there was little that was unusual about the Leonese church in the twelfth century may seem a lame conclusion. It will appear less so to those who are acquainted with the work of Spanish ecclesiastical historians. Much of their writing has been underpinned by the assumption that there was something special or unusual about the church in Spain, an assumption explicable in part by the tendency to study it in isolation, rather than as a member of the community of western Christendom. It is to be hoped that this essay will go a little way along the road to correcting this misapprehension.

Of course, no two members of this community were or are exactly alike; so it may not be inappropriate to conclude with some reflections about those features of the secular church in the kingdom of León which do seem to be distinctive. The most striking of them is the awkwardness of its structure in relationship to historical and political realities. The kingdom of León had a historical coherence fashioned in the tenth and eleventh centuries which survived the union with Castile and re-emerged in the form of a distinct political unit on the death of Alfonso VII in 1157. But the notion of a 'Leonese church' makes little sense; as an ecclesiastical unit it had scarcely any identity in the twelfth century, seeing that its bishops owed loyalty to metropolitans variously at Braga, Toledo or Compostela, and in two instances to no metropolitan below the pope. This sort of muddle did not occur at other places in Europe where ecclesiastical organization was being overhauled in the course of the twelfth century, in Ireland, for example, or Norway, or Sweden. Why did it happen in Spain? Naturally we can only guess. Was it because the reformers were too little respectful of a recent Leonese past, too much respectful of a distant Visigothic one? Was it because they were outsiders who took little trouble to understand Spanish conditions before they imposed their administrative network? Or perhaps it was not like this at all. The organization we find in the twelfth century was the outcome of a multitude of decisions taken by many different people over a long period of time; compromises, sometimes, reached in weariness of spirit after long expense of rancour. It is too easy for us to say that the result was a mess, and that by the time it was apparent as such it was too late to do anything about it. A mess is what reformers often produce.

Supposing that the kingdom of León had been formally an ecclesiastical unit -- a single metropolitan province, let us say -- this would still have had little coherence. The kingdom was uneasily divided between Galicia, the old-settled lands of the central plateau and the new frontier territories. The concerns of ecclesiastics were necessarily as diverse as those of secular men. We may doubt whether a bishop of Ciudad Rodrigo or Coria had much in common with a bishop of Astorga or León, let alone with a bishop of Tuy or Mondoñedo. Such a state of affairs was not peculiar to León; as foolish to
suppose that an archbishop of Magdeburg had much in common with a bishop of Riga, or an archbishop of York with his suffragan of the Orkneys. Such diversity of interests and concerns, however, may have mattered in a small and poor kingdom like León in a way that it did not elsewhere, for example in the larger and richer Corona de Aragón. The bishops of the southern sees -- like their Castilian or their Portuguese neighbours (Sigüenza, Segovia, Avila, Plasencia, Idanha, Lisbon) -- were trying to refound a Christian church in new territories, in much the same way as their contemporaries the bishops in Outremer. The churchmen of the north presided over an old-established church and were probably little, if at all, interested in the progress of the Reconquista. There was little point of contact between them.

Like branches of the church elsewhere in the twelfth century -- Ireland is a good example -- the Leonese church was undergoing organizational reform at the hands of outsiders. The impulse towards change seems to have slackened in the second half of the century, perhaps because the administrative changes had been effected by then, perhaps because foreign reformers were no longer entering the kingdom in such numbers as they had done hitherto. But were the reforms 'followed up'? Organization is one thing, pastoral practice quite another.

We come back to the bishops themselves. How little we know about them, and how difficult therefore to come to any sort of judgement on them. In general they seem not to have been a very distinguished lot. It may be illuminating to compare them with their English contemporaries. In one respect the lack of distinction of the Spaniards is at once apparent. They were singularly deficient in intellectual attainment. Of course, an Anselm or a Stephen Langton is a rarity in any age or country. Yet throughout the twelfth century there were among the English bishops men who had at their command a body of solid and respectable learning such as did them credit. There were several who if not themselves scholars were patrons of scholarship. There were others whose intellectual vitality found expression in discerning patronage of the arts. There were others again whose qualities of mind can be seen not in ecclesiastical learning but in the practical arts of government and administration. We look in vain for these qualities among the Leonese bishops. Pedro Suárez de Deza and Martín of Zamora may have been competent canon lawyers, but they cannot bear comparison with a Bartholomew of Exeter or a Roger of Worcester. The latinity of Pelayo of Oviedo or Arnaldo I of Astorga -- if the latter did indeed compose the Chronica Adefonsi Imperatoris -- is poor weak stuff when set against that of a Herbert Losinga or (a native of England but a bishop in France) a John of Salisbury. No Leonese bishop at any time during the century encouraged scholarship as did Archbishop Theobald of Canterbury. Leonese bishops certainly patronized the arts. But here too they were curiously hesitant and slow to respond to new ideas. The cathedral of Santiago de Compostela is a magnificent building, but it is in no sense original as its contemporary Durham was; heavily dependent on French models, it belonged to an architectural tradition that was already outmoded. The very few surviving illuminated manuscripts from León show this same reluctance to follow new trends and fashions. Questions of scale apart, no Leonese bishop showed the discernment in artistic patronage of an Alexander the Magnificent or a Henry of Blois. It was the same with the skills of practical affairs. Royal servants who acquired bishoprics in the kingdom of León -- a Nuño of Mondoñedo or a Berengar of Salamanca -- were not men with the forceful ingenuity of the great civil-servant bishops of Norman and Angevin England -- a Flambard, a Roger of Salisbury, a Hubert Walter.

Intellectual attainment, though desirable, is not an essential prerequisite in a bishop. Were the Leonese bishops good pastors of their flocks? Did they adopt those administrative practices which might have assisted them in their pastoral mission? In our earlier consideration of surviving episcopal acta and of the other evidence relating to diocesan administration, we saw that the Leonese bishops were slow to adopt new instruments and techniques, and that the machinery of episcopal government seems to have worked sluggishly. This is in itself suggestive. Administrative efficiency is not pastoral efficiency: but
the two often go hand in hand. It is probably fair to say that the Leonese bishops were less active pastors than they might have been. Of course, such a thing could be said of many bishops at any period in history; a Grosseteste is a rare phenomenon indeed. But men like him did exist in the twelfth century; in England, Foliot was such a one. We know of no such in the kingdom of León.

An air of mediocrity, then, hangs over these bishops. It would be possible to argue that they were more reprehensible than this. Is it not surprising that there is no certain evidence for the holding of ecclesiastical councils after 1155? Is it not somewhat disconcerting to find that visitations and synods tend to have the look of occasions when fund-raising was uppermost in episcopal minds? Is it not distinctly odd to find a bishop of Lugo in the year 1189 leasing a church to a laywoman for an annual mone

We must reiterate yet once more that our body of source material is extremely small. It may be a proceeding of questionable honesty to select evidence for malpractice from that tiny corpus in order to paint these bishops in darker colours. Yet it would be equally dishonest to gloss over the evidence that all was not well with the Leonese church. How harshly we choose to judge these bishops will depend in the last resort upon the subjective judgement about how far we think we can go in our interpretation of scanty evidence. The historian of a dark age can state problems but he cannot solve them.

The heart of the matter may be that the Leonese bishops were poor bishops, and it is arguable that they were poor because they were under the thumb of their rulers. Here once more we need to tread with circumspection. The nature of twelfth-century records makes it notoriously difficult to say anything with confidence about episcopal finances in any country. Yet it is hard to resist a sense forced in upon one after long acquaintance with the evidence that Leonese bishops were worse off at the end of the century than they had been at its beginning. It must be frankly admitted that this is an impression, not an assertion susceptible of proof; the means are not yet to hand which would enable us to say anything with confidence about the material resources of any one of these bishoprics. But even an impression may have its uses. Take the see of Santiago de Compostela: in the time of Diego Gelmírez it was clearly very rich; he could initiate an enormous building programme, establish a chapter with no fewer than seventy-two canons, lavish bribes on popes and cardinals, build castles and a fleet. Pedro Suárez, on the other hand, looks like a man operating on a more restricted budget; he tried to limit capitular growth, undertook no new building, and made a determined attempt to tap new sources of revenue like the famous levy known as the votos de Santiago. Is it purely coincidental that the archbishopric should display these signs of financial strain not long after the troubled years of royal intervention between 1140 and 1173? The case of Oviedo is more dramatic. The Oviedo of Bishop Pelayo was certainly wealthy; he could offer Queen Urraca an astounding sum for the señorío of the town in 1112. But a century later the see was in desperate straits; the bishop could not pay the 15,000 aurei he owed for tercias and had had to borrow from the king to redeem property from usurers. We do not know how the situation had arisen. It is worth noting, however, that there was one period in the century when the church of Oviedo had passed out of the control of its bishops for no little time, into the hands of one who was not well-disposed towards it; and that was during the exile of bishop Juan when the see was in the hands of Alfonso IX, a period of over seven years, from at latest March 1191 to at earliest May 1198. At Lugo, Cardinal Hyacinth effected in 1173 a reduction in size of the cathedral chapter, because the resources of the see could no longer support such a big one. At Tuy, like Mondoñedo never a rich see, the upheavals of 1170 led to heavy temporary and perhaps some permanent financial loss. The southern sees of the kingdom fared rather better, but of course they faced a different problem; as 'new' sees they had started with nothing. The signs are that Salamanca's and Zamora's endowments steadily grew. Coria, on the other hand, was so modestly endowed by Alfonso VII in 1142 that its bishop took the matter to Pope Eugenius III in 1148, who appealed to the king to be more generous.
Individually these scraps of evidence amount to very little. They may be no more than straws in the wind -- but it is significant that they all seem to be blown in the same direction. It may also be significant that royal exactions, or royal [227] failure to provide, seem often to have been at the back of the financial difficulties experienced by Leonese bishops. Possibly material poverty was in part at least brought about by the general sluggishness of the episcopate in matters of ecclesiastical reform. We have already commented upon the lack of church councils during the second half of the century. Churchmen gathered in councils can stand up to kings in a way that a churchman on his own cannot. But no councils were held.

For the twelfth century we have only hints and we can make only guesses. The historian of the thirteenth century can set his sights a little higher, for the surviving source-material is vastly greater in bulk than that relating to the twelfth century. A recent study has used this material to advantage. It is now plain that during the thirteenth century the Leonese-Castilian churches were very poor; that they were closely controlled by the kings (who must therefore be held responsible for at least the perpetuation of this poverty); and that, judged by the moral, pastoral and intellectual standards set at the Fourth Lateran Council, their condition was deplorable. It is not to be believed that these characteristics developed in the years after 1215. The roots of decay lay deeper.

We should not forget that the men who made up the Leonese episcopate in the twelfth century had much to contend with. Their land was ill-endowed by nature. It was isolated from the main currents of European culture. It was a prey to external enemies. It experienced periods of civil war. Kings and nobility were predatory. The church over which the bishops presided was a various one: an old church had to be adapted to new standards, had with difficulty to be reconciled to change; a new church had to be constructed in newly-won territories, had to be endowed, organized, supervised. These tasks demanded time and money; they demanded a whole range of human qualities, tact and flair, energy and vision, moral authority and administrative expertise. The complicating factors of kings who wanted a [228] Reichskirche, of political rivalries between León, Castile and Portugal, of metropolitans wrangling over suffragans, of a papal curia increasingly assertive but not always sympathetic nor well-informed, of incoming ecclesiastical empire-builders from France -- all served to compound the bishops' difficulties. These bishops may have been by and large a rather dim lot; but how many twelfth-century bishops measured up to ideal standards? In the years after 1215 their work was weighed in the balance; that it was found wanting may not have been altogether their own fault.

Notes for Chapter Six

1. Perhaps therefore a book about the Leonese episcopate should not have been written. But a part of my purpose, lurking in the background, was to suggest that there were reasons other than the purely political for the failure of the independent kingdom of León to survive after 1230.


3. C.R. Dodwell, Painting in Europe 800-1200 (Harmondsworth, 1971), chs. 6 and 11.

4. See below, Appendix, no. XXI.

5. In my doctoral thesis, which represents a first draft of the present work, I was disposed to judge these bishops rather more harshly than I am now.

6. On the date of the forgery of the 'diploma of Ramiro I' which provided justification for the levy, see T.D. Kendrick, St. James in Spain (London, 1960), chs. iii and xiv.

7. MHV II, nos. 477, 494.